

Yi He

Who Were the Puritans?

Welcome to the lecture “Who were the Puritans?” in this course! This lecture attempts to answer that very question! I talk about the Puritans in pretty much every single lecture for this course, so you will of course learn about who they are throughout this course. However, this lecture will give some basic background about who they were and answer some basic questions like “what did they eat?” and “what were their occupations?” In this course I focus on the New England Puritans, those Puritans who migrated to New England in North America. But “Puritan” is a term initially applied to certain Protestants in England. It was a demeaning term for those who did not think that the Church of England had changed enough during the Reformation. In this lecture I’ll discuss the differences between the Puritans and the Pilgrims, the role and significance of their faith, some of the foods that they ate, and one specific Puritan person I want to highlight. The learning goals are for you to be able to identify and explain one facet of the New England Puritans from this lecture that you think is important (for example, why they are called the “Puritans,” how they were different from the Pilgrims, what they ate, their professions, etc.) and provide a reason for why Cotton Mather might be a significant Puritan.

The New England Puritans are, as the name might indicate, those English Puritans who moved to New England, as well as the immediate descendants of those migrants. These English Puritans moved because they disagreed with many of the Church of England’s practices, strongly enough that they felt they needed to be in a new place in order to practice Christianity the way they felt was authentic. Some of the first ones came in 1630, but many more continued to come after that. The land that they moved to they began to call “New England,” though it was technically part of the colony of Virginia which at that time extended along the East coast (Chaney et al.).¹ Some Wabanaki people and other Native American groups in the Northeast called the region they settled in “Dawnland” or “land of the dawn” (Strobel 1-2). One of their main reasons for moving was, as I mentioned, because they thought that the Church of England had become corrupted and retained traditions that should have been removed. These traditions included ministers wearing surplices, or ceremonial gowns, and using the Book of Common Prayer, which contained set prayers and statements to say during worship services. Both of these were seen as unnecessary human addendums.² While the Reformation had cleansed the church, they thought more remained to be done in England. In 1629, King Charles in England granted a group of Puritans a charter in Massachusetts Bay. Officially, the charter was granted to the Massachusetts Bay Company. The company started sending English people to the colonies. When John Winthrop came over in 1630, he and others wrote a statement about their decision to move. They thought that coming to Massachusetts “was a great work “in regard of God’s glory and the Church’s good,”” referencing the religious reasons for their move (Winthrop qtd in Winship, *Hot Protestants* 77). Sometimes the terms “nonconformist” or “dissenter” overlap with “Puritan”—these all refer to Protestant people who didn’t fully agree with all the practices of the Church of England. The term “Puritan” in fact, is heavily contested by scholars regarding its definition and use (Winship, “Were There Any” 118-9).

There is one distinction to make note of. There were separating Puritans and nonseparating Puritans. Normally, we only call the nonseparating Puritans “Puritans.” The separating ones we normally call the “Pilgrims.” They are called “separating Puritans” or

¹ Yes, to the English, “Virginia” used to refer to much of the East coast of America.

² See Winship, *Hot Protestants*, 26-9 for surplices and 120, 253 for the Book of Common Prayer.

“Separatists” because they wanted to completely separate from the Church of England. They had moved from England to a place in Massachusetts that they called “Plymouth,” or, to Native people, “Patuxet.” The Pilgrims sailed aboard the Mayflower. These are the people who first moved to the Netherlands before going on to America. They are also the ones who purportedly ate one of the first Thanksgiving feasts with Wampanoag people. The nonseparating ones are the ones who settled in the Boston area. They thought of themselves as still part of the Church of England even though they thought it had become corrupted and they criticized its practices.

Let’s look at demographics and occupations. Most of the Puritans who moved to New England came in family units. Apparently, the proportions of Puritan migrants who came in family groups is one of the highest in American immigration history. For example, in one group of 700 people who sailed from Norfolk and Kent in England, 94% of that group consisted of family units. This contrasts with another area in early America like Virginia where many more men migrated than women-4 times as many men as women (Fischer 26). Records show high levels of church membership in New England. It does seem that most of those who moved to America did continue to feel strongly about their faith in America. Not everyone who came was a professional minister though! Many of the people who came were described by scholar David Fischer as of the “middling strata” (27). There were some men who would be considered “gentlemen,” or of a slightly higher class, but most people were “yeomen, husbandmen, artisans, craftsmen, merchants, and traders” (28). For example, they might have worked as weavers, cobblers, and blacksmiths (28).

Finally, I’ve found that people like to know about what the Puritans were like as real people. What kind of foods did they eat? What was their everyday life like? These are very important questions too. Let’s focus on what they ate. I will be pulling a lot of this information from scholar David Hackett Fischer, who has cited Sarah McMahon’s work frequently. One important part of their diet was called “pease porridge,” or a pea porridge. This was an ancestor of the dish of New England baked beans. Peas were eaten pretty frequently in general. The peas the Puritans ate were brought to the Americas from England (Fischer 136). Apparently the most frequently prepared vegetable in the winter was dried peas. Next, they ate bread that they baked. Initially this was made with wheat flour and cornmeal. Later, after a disease lessened the amount of wheat available, they made the bread with rye flour and cornmeal. While foods like salmon, oysters, and clams were available, apparently they were not particularly interested in these (Fischer 137). Apparently pies, a tradition retained from England, became popular and grew and evolved (Fischer 138-9).

Finally, let’s take a deeper dive to learn about one specific American Puritan, Cotton Mather. Castigated for his role in the Salem witch trials, judged for the apparent hypocrisy of his diary, and perhaps seen as a symbol of what could go wrong with the Puritans, I nevertheless wish to reclaim him in this lecture. I want to show that he was someone who pursued serious scholarly inquiries and was genuinely passionate about learning. This is not to say that he was blameless. Various criticisms of him are still very legitimate, but I don’t think they capture all the details of who he was. Mather was actually one of the earliest people living in the Americas to be elected to the Royal Society in England. He apparently conducted one of the first experiments developing plant hybrids (“Record”). His book *The Christian Philosopher* explores some of the key scientific concepts of his day, including those that Isaac Newton had recently formulated. He organized one of the first vaccination efforts when smallpox hit Boston; inoculation was a concept that he learned from Onesimus, a man enslaved to him. He was also a very prolific writer. He apparently published more than 450 texts (“Record”). His commentary

on the Bible, which he called *Biblia Americana*, is in six large volumes (“Biography”). Scholars are preparing a version of this work for publication soon (“The Project”). He was the pastor of Boston’s Second Church where his father also had taught. His book *Magnalia Christi Americana* captures in extensive detail the arrival of English colonists to New England and the growth of churches therein. Let’s look at his role in the Salem witch trials. He is seen as a defender and even instigator of the trials. He did write a book called *Wonders of the Invisible World*, which largely narrated what had gone on in Salem as fairly legitimate and important. This book shaped the public and later people’s views on him as short-sighted and judgmental. He supported the trials and the decisions of the judges. However, while he played a role in the aftermath of the trials, he wasn’t formally involved in the judges’ decisions or other parts of the trials.

In this course we’ll explore the Puritans’ communications media. How did they express, publish, speak, announce, lecture, teach or write? These are questions this course covers. John Dewey wrote, “Of all affairs, communication is the most wonderful” (138). This—communication—is precisely the area that this course explores, but from the angle of early New England. We’ll look at different definitions of communications, media, and genre, and explore specific Puritan media objects like the *Bay Psalm Book*. I give learning goals and discussion questions for each lecture. Make sure to answer the discussion questions to accomplish some of the learning goals and to respond to others’ points in the forums. This lecture has two discussion questions. Happy discussing!

Discussion question 1: Choose *Wonders of the Invisible World*, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, or *Biblia Americana* (three of Mather’s most prominent works) and read some more about it on the web or in other sources. Why did you choose the work you did? What does this tell you about who Cotton Mather was? How did this work shape Puritan society or why do you think it was significant?

Also, read some more about Cotton Mather (you find a biography here:

<https://matherproject.org/node/22>) or another New England Puritan (for example: Increase Mather, John Winthrop, Anne Bradstreet, Edward Taylor, John Danforth, or someone else). Who is the person you have chosen, what has he/she done, and what is striking about him/her? What are some reasons it could be helpful or important to learn about him/her? How does he/she compare with Cotton Mather and what else you know about the Puritans from this lecture?

Discussion question 2: Using whatever you do know (from this lecture and/or elsewhere), assess English people’s motives for moving to New England. Why did they do this? Was it a smart choice, and what were some of the advantages and disadvantages? Since a lot of families seemed to have moved over, how do you think parents would have explained the move to their children?

Discussion question 3: Identify and explain one facet of the New England Puritans from this lecture that you think is important (for example, why they are called the “Puritans,” how they were different from the Pilgrims, what they ate, their professions, etc.). Why did you choose this facet and why do you think it is important?

Additional Reading and Works Cited

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